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DON'T DENY PEOPLE THE POWER OF A WORD

BY LISA SUHAY

MEDFORD, N.J. - I have spent the better part of the past 15 years as a reporter, the last four also as a children's book author. I do it because, while I know the sword and the dollar are mighty influences on the world, they pale when compared with the written word.

So it came as no surprise that legal beagle Johnnie Cochran would choose to blame the use of a single word for the death of seven people in Baltimore. What got me was the one he chose: BELIEVE.

The word is part of Baltimore's antidrug campaign that both requests and insists in that single word that the people have faith in themselves and their neighbors to "redeem the core identity of the city."

Believe. The word hangs over the city as an invitation to rise.

In a legal wind-up to an intended lawsuit, Mr. Cochran contends that the "Baltimore Believe" campaign is the reason seven members of the Dawson family were killed in an October arson fire set after they spoke out against drug dealers in their midst. Cochran's suggestion is that encouraging them to believe was irresponsible on the part of the city because it encouraged them to do something that got them killed. It encouraged them to stand up and fight for what they believed.

Would Cochran sue Rosa Parks for keeping her seat and thus sparking others to hold their ground and in doing so be injured or killed? Or perhaps he would have brought action against Martin Luther King Jr. for every death that resulted from the civil rights movement because he encouraged people to have a dream?

This situation leaves me with that dread that comes when you see a disaster ready to happen - you want to scream a warning, as I do now.

Maybe I feel this so keenly because just two days before news of Cochran's legal move, I drove into Baltimore where I was greeted by: BELIEVE.

Slender white block letters on a black background draped the tallest skyscrapers and clung to the bumpers of public vehicles.

The word hanging in the snow-strewn air was a unique and ethereal sort of comfort as I came up Light Street and saw the Legg Mason building dissolving up into the fog as if its only purpose was to hold out that word of hope and empowerment.

Some will give me a big roll of the eyes on this, but think about it for just a moment. How audacious. How eloquent. How wise to take a single word and clarify for people that the power is where it belongs, in their own hands and hearts.

It does not blame, cajole, frighten, enforce, or heap guilt. It empowers people as individuals and a community. It both invokes and evokes faith.

The word had such a powerful positive effect on my morale and attitude for the few days I was in the city, I began to think this was too good an idea to keep to just one location.

I thought, "We need a national Believe campaign and not just to thwart drugs. If there were a billboard, or building in every city wearing that word in black and white, maybe we could 'redeem the core and identity' of the country."

Remember the core? That place the rest of the world looked to for good - a place where no one would believe that standing for what is right is wrong.

I don't think Cochran realizes "believe" is a core word. It is a word that props up this country and its people.

We believe and we act on our beliefs and we fight for them wherever they are being challenged. That's who we are.

Believing was not the problem. The drug dealers and their abject terror of that one, very powerful word and what it inspires was the problem.

If you want to go into Baltimore or anywhere else and omit a word, here are the ones I would recommend: hate, cowardice, fear, war, evil - and litigiousness.

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